

WORKSHOP: "SOAPSTONE CARVING"



Summary: Participants will learn basic soapstone carving techniques using hand held tile saws, rasps, files, wet sandpaper, polishing cloths and mineral oil. They will be able to create their own design independently or with assistance on a small block of soft soapstone. Safety equipment will be provided and the class will run over multiple weeks to allow time for polishing and finishing.

Materials and Equipment:

soapstone block	pencil, eraser, sharpener
files	sketch paper
rasps	carbon paper
crosscut or rip saw	bucket and water
t-shirt scraps for polishing	tape measure
mineral oil	safety glasses
wet sandpaper black ice 1000A, 1200A, 1500A	dust mask
smocks	dust pan and brush or vacuum
plastic gloves reusable and work gloves	compass
ruler	optional: wildlife book
protractor	crazy glue
optional: soapstone carving book	artwork samples
instructions/ideas sheet	optional: acetone (nail polish remover) – not provided

Class Plan:

1. Stone carving creates a lot of dust This workshop is best done outside if possible.
 - a. Wear a dust mask when cutting to avoid breathing in the fine dust.
 - b. We also recommend wearing work gloves while sawing and safety glasses.
2. Gather the equipment for your project including:
 - a. A bucket to work in if you will be wet carving



- b. Rasps for more coarse work



- c. Assorted files



3. Cut a block of soapstone from a larger block, unless precut. We used blocks 4" x 4".
 - a. A rip saw (left) cuts the stone a lot faster than a smaller crosscut saw (right), but either work.



- b. Work on a surface high enough to allow space for the saw over the edge and below the table.
- c. Clamping your stone to the work surface while cutting off blocks is also recommended.
- d. Buying a larger block and cutting it into smaller pieces yourself (above right) is usually less expensive than buying precut smaller blocks.



- e. There are also rough pieces available for sale in varying shapes.
4. Sketch your design on the top of your block (left), on each side (centre and right), and on the bottom, based on how the three-dimensional shape would look from each direction.



- a. A regular pencil works on soapstone. However, if the stone is dark or you can't see the lines, drawing with the tip of a file or rasp works very well.



- b. We are carving a mushroom as an example. It is a nice introductory shape that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and suits modifying the design as we go if needed.

5. Cut away larger sections at the edges to rough out the basic shape of your carving (centre) with a cross cut or similar saw (left). Save the extra pieces for future small carvings like pendants (right).



6. For carving, working in a bucket of water will substantially reduce the airborne dust and make it less necessary to wear a mask while working.



- a. Working in water will not damage your soapstone and can actually speed up carving. Wearing reusable rubber or vinyl gloves keeps your fingers dry as you go and offers some protection.
7. Work the shape of your sculpture from all sides using a coarse rasp to remove material quickly.
 - a. Work your rasp over your sculpture surface back and forth and in circular motions to remove material.



- b. Check your sculpture frequently on each side as you approach the pencil lines of your design.

- c. Estimate the curve of the sections between pencil lines to form a smooth dome for the top of the mushroom shape.
8. Once you are at or within a hair of the edge of your pencil lines with the deepest cuts of your rasp, switch to working with a file.



9. File the surface of your sculpture, smoothing out the grooves from the rasp and fine tuning the shape of your sculpture.



10. To carve in surface details like a face in an owl or feathered shapes for example, use the tip of the rasp or file to carve deeper and textured grooves.



11. Switch to a finer file as you progress if available.
12. Once your sculpture surface is as smooth as possible from filing, switch to sanding the surface of the soapstone with wet black ice sandpaper or the equivalent.



- a. Start with a wet sandpaper grit about 1000A and sand until the surface is as smooth as you can get it. Switch to a finer sandpaper grit 1200A and then 1500A depending on what you have access to.
 - b. This step can be done in water to minimize dust and accelerate the process if desired.
13. To make sanding easier, you can use a sanding block (left) or sponge (right) to help. The sponge is less likely to wear a flat section, bending with your surface as you go.



14. Check for scratches or irregularities between each step that can best be smoothed with the tool you are using. It is easier to see scratches and surface shapes when your sculpture is dry.
15. Polish your finished sculpture with a smooth cloth like a chamois.
 - a. Be careful to make sure your polishing cloth is clean and does not have any debris (however fine) from your work table. Debris, even very fine particles, in your polishing cloth can quickly re-scratch your sculpture and set you back a few steps.
16. Allow your sculpture to dry.
17. Make a final check for any fine scratches you'd like to remove and repeat any of the steps above as necessary.
18. Apply clear unscented mineral oil to your sculpture with a soft clean rag.



- a. Reoil a few times to achieve a nice shine and bring out the natural colour of your stone.
 - b. Once oiled the stone will look like it is wet even when it isn't, accentuating the natural colour.
19. Soapstone is very soft with a soapy feel and can easily scratch even with a fingernail. Display your creation in a safe place. If your sculpture gets scratched you can sand, polish and reoil it even years later.
 20. Happy creating, and please send us feedback and pictures of your creations if you feel comfortable sharing.

Useful Information/Adaptions/Variations:

- Soapstone is metamorphic rock consisting mainly of talc. It feels soapy to the touch, thus the name. It is also known as steatite.
- Soapstone can be formed in layers, that can separate as you carve. Work carefully if your carving reveals sections that could separate. They can be glued back together with crazy glue if needed.



- Soapstone comes in different colour shades depending on what else is included in the rock. Depending where it comes from it may contain different amounts of other minerals like mica, quartz, and magnesite.

Trouble Shooting:

- If your soapstone breaks while carving, the pieces can be glued back together with crazy glue.



- Soapstone can have impurities in it too, that are not as soft and can make it difficult to carve that part of the stone. They may remain as producing areas. Try leaving that part of the carving higher, so the impurities remain mostly hidden or incorporate them into your design.
- Some oils can stain soapstone. To lighten stains, polish the area with acetone (nail polish remover). Test on a scrap piece of stone first if available.